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The Hideous Noise of Prayer: The Cloud of Unknowing on the Syllable-Word

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This essay is an account of the “litil worde of o silable” mentioned several times in The Cloud of Unknowing. Despite the fact that its utterance makes up a prayer whose practice is the work of unknowing itself, the “litil worde” has been given surprisingly little attention. My aim here is first of all to describe as accurately as possible the procedure of prayer taught in the Cloud, and secondly to suggest that this procedure can best be understood in the terms provided by the medieval linguistic sciences, and notably grammar. As I reconstruct it here, the prayer consists in the production of an utterance that is both a syllable and a word, and thus neither. It occurs in the repetition of this utterance, and the “unknowing” that it brings about is nothing else than the experience of confusion that momentarily afflicts the mind of someone repeating a word to the point of nonsense.

KEYWORDS: Cloud of Unknowing, grammar, vernacular theology, nonsense, Priscian, vox, prayer.

This essay is an account of the “litil worde of o silable” (little word of one syllable) that is mentioned several times in The Cloud of Unknowing, an anonymous mystical treatise written in Middle English in or around the 1380s. Despite the fact that its utterance makes up a prayer whose practice is the work of unknowing itself, the “litil worde” has been given surprisingly little attention. My aim here is first of all to describe as accurately as possible the procedure of prayer taught in the Cloud, and secondly to suggest that this procedure can best be understood in the terms provided by the medieval linguistic sciences, and notably grammar. As I reconstruct it here, the prayer consists in the production of an utterance that is both a syllable and a word, and thus neither. It occurs in the repetition of this utterance, and the “unknowing” that it brings about is nothing
else than the experience of confusion that momentarily afflicts the mind of someone repeating a word to the point of nonsense. Nevertheless, the Cloud-author has never been thought to take an interest in the scientiae vocis, and so a few words about my presuppositions are in order here.

I have proceeded on the basis of a distinction that seems to me essential to the purposes of the Cloud. As I see it, the treatise is not all of a piece. It contains first of all the set of practical instructions in the prayer procedure in which I am interested here. But these instructions take up only a small portion of the text. The majority of the treatise is devoted to something else: explaining, situating, elaborating, and otherwise accounting for the prayer procedure in the terms of a particular discourse, what scholars would now call “late medieval affective apophaticism.” But the fact that the Cloud-author situates the prayer procedure within a particular discourse does not mean that the procedure belongs to that discourse. To the contrary, the effort he expends to assimilate the one to the other demonstrates the necessity of such a labor. Neither does the prayer have anything essential in common with the models and corollaries that have been proposed for it, for example the aspirative prayer of a Hugh of Balma or the meditations on the name Jhesu of a Walter Hilton or a Richard Rolle. Insofar as the procedure is inassimilable to the affective tradition, it can and must be read on its own terms.

The question is what those terms might be. Most of the attention paid to the treatise in recent decades that does not focus on its theological doctrines focuses instead on the fact that it is written in a particular idiom, Middle English, and in a particular (“homely” and “literary”) style. I have my doubts about the pertinence of these observations. It is worth noting first of all that the Cloud-author, for his part, appears entirely uninterested in the fact that he writes in English; in any event, he never mentions it. I will discuss the question of the treatise’s “vernacularity” at greater length below. As for the stylistic features of the treatise, three observations can be made. First, its tendency to recur to a homely register is entirely in keeping with pseudo-Dionysian indications as to the fitness of unlike figures, and thus does not amount to an especially literary gesture. Second, as J. A. Burrow cautioned thirty years ago, its rhetorical strategies are by no means uncommon in Middle English prose, and are “better left unmarked by any special comment” unless they can be shown to be particularly significant as “part of the author’s whole effort to realize a story or explore an idea” (143). Third, it has been suggested with frequency that these devices are, in fact, crucial to the Cloud-author’s “whole effort to explore an idea,” because his purpose is to produce in the reader an aesthetic experience that would amount to unknowing itself. In other words, just to read the treatise would already be to do the work it counsels. This notion seems to me to obscure much more than it reveals, for not only does the Cloud-author never say anything of the sort, he does not fail to declare exactly what the work of unknowing will consist in: and it is not “literature” but a practice of prayer whose procedure is that of the “litil worde.”

Neither vernacular-theological nor literary, the terms of the procedure are sermocinal: they bear on the nature of the utterance as it was theorized by the linguistic disciplines of the trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Confining myself for the most part to the most basic of these, I suggest in what follows that the prayer is an elaboration of
possibilities announced in Priscian’s *Institutiones grammaticae*.

It will be objected that I do not prove that the *Cloud*-author knew this work. No such proof is necessary. The passages to which I refer here are those in which the most basic distinctions of the most basic medieval discipline are laid out, distinctions that were rehearsed in all the medieval grammatical textbooks and would have been intimately familiar to any literate person in the Middle Ages. My argument does not rest on the notion that the *Cloud*-author took any particular interest in grammar: he didn’t. But he could by no means have been unaware of the foundational concepts of the “cradle of the sciences,” *grammatica*, what Rita Copeland has called a “master discourse, providing the means of access to all other knowledge in the insistently textual culture of the Middle Ages”.

1. The syllable

The first invocation of the “litil worde” comes in Chapter 7:

> what tyme Þat Þou purposest Þee to Þis werk, & felest bi grace Þat Þou arte clepid of God, lift Þan up Þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue. & mene God Þat maad Þee, & bouþt Þee, & Þat graciously haþ clepid Þee to Þis werk: & resseieue none oþer Dout of God. & it not alle Þee, bot Þee list; for it suffiseþ inou a naked entent directe vnto God, wiþ-outen any oþer cause Þen him-self. & if Þee list haue Þis entent lappid & foulden in o worde, for Þou schuldest haue betir holde Þer-apon, take Þee bot a litil worde of o silable; for so it is betir Þen of two, for euer Þe schorter it is, Þe betir it acordeþ wiþ Þe werk of Þe spirite. & soche a worde is Þis worde GOD or Þis worde LOUE. Cheese Þee wheþer Þou wilt, or anoþer as Þe list: whiche Þee likeþ best of o silable. & fasten Þis worde to Þin herte, so Þat it neuer go Þens for Þing Þat bifalleþ. (28)

When you apply yourself to this work, and feel by grace that you are called by God, lift up your heart to God with a humble stirring of love. And mean God who created you, and redeemed you, and who has graciously called you to this work: and admit no other thought of God. And yet not all of these, but only as it pleases you; for a bare intent directed to God is sufficient, without any other object besides himself. And if it pleases you to have this intent wrapped up and folded in a word, so that you might have a better hold on it, take just a little word of one syllable; for such a word is better than one of two syllables, for the shorter it is, the more fitting it is to the work of the spirit. And such a word is this word GOD or this word LOVE. Choose whichever of these two you wish, or another as it pleases you: whichever word you like best that is of one syllable. And fasten this word to your heart, so that it is never separated from it, no matter what happens.

In this passage the *Cloud*-author describes the work of unknowing as a prayer that does not praise or petition but rather attempts to mean God himself. As he explains elsewhere in the treatise, this “meaning” is in fact the attempt to remove all particular concepts from the mind, in order to bring about an encounter with the nought but God. This attempt appears to be a matter of the will alone, the directing of a bare intent toward God, so that the point would be to dispense not only with particular thoughts but also with any of the linguistic props in which prayer might be thought to take place. But immediately, and without marking any disjunction, the *Cloud*-author now recommends that the will be wrapped up in a “litil worde.” Many commentators have indicated that this practice
would be optional and, what’s more, better avoided by those more adept at the work of unknowing. Such a reading might seem to be borne out by the Cloud-author’s reference to the desire of the contemplative, “if Þee list” (if it pleases you, as you like). But in the context of the Cloud, in which what is essential is your being stirred to do the work of unknowing, a reference to the desire of the contemplative can only serve to emphasize the importance of the practice. For the desire to carry out the work of unknowing is coextensive with the work itself: “as moche as Þou wylnest it & desirest it, so mochel hast Þou of it, & no more ne no lesse” (as much as you will it and desire it, so much do you have of it, and no more nor less; 70).

Having recommended the practice of the “litil worde,” the Cloud-author now gives two examples of words fitting for the purpose: “And soche a worde is Þis worde GOD or Þis worde LOUE” (and such a word is this word GOD or this word LOVE). These words are fitting because they fulfill the single requirement governing the choice of word: that it be “of o silable” (of one syllable). All that matters about the word is its syllable count, which must be one. That the littleness of the word is specifically a matter of syllabic quantity has not always been kept in mind, and its implications have never been remarked. The word “syllable” is a technical term in a particular discipline, and that discipline is grammar. Grammar is the science that takes as its object of study the utterance insofar as it admits of syllabification. Conversely, syllable count does not pertain to words except insofar as their susceptibility to grammatical analysis is presupposed. The repeated and consistent terminological choice on the part of the Cloud-author to refer to the prayer word as “of o silable” places the “litil worde” within the field of grammar, and it suggests that the status of its littleness should be understood on the basis of the explanations of the syllable provided by grammarians.

What do the grammatical textbooks say about the syllable? The definition repeated throughout the Middle Ages is that of the sixth-century grammarian Priscian, who writes that

Possumus tamen et sic definire syllabam: syllaba est vox literalis, quae sub uno accento et uno spiritu indistanter profertur. (44)

We can define the syllable as follows: the syllable is a writable utterance [vox literalis] that is emitted uninterruptedly under a single accentuation and a single breath.

At the most basic level, the syllable is a variety of vocal utterance. It is a collecting together, in a single unit, of the elementa vocis. It is a matter of accent and breath, something pronounced and emerging from the mouth. The first consequence of the Cloud-author’s specification of the “litil worde” as syllabic is thus that it consists in something said aloud, something emitted by the voice. It is not a form of silent meditation but an utterance. Nonetheless, there are indications to the contrary, the most serious of which is that the prayer is “goostly,” uttered only in spirit, and that “it is best whan it is in pure spirit, wiþ-outyn special Þout or any pronounsyng of worde” (it is best when it is in pure spirit, without particular thought or any utterance of words; 78). It is this idea of the prayer as silent that has been picked up by modern scholars. For example, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and her colleagues refer, in an influential anthology, to the practice as
“a form of silent prayer” without further qualification (230), and Cheryl Taylor appears to consider the technique to be one of “mental prayer” consisting finally in “word-free, imageless contemplation” (42).

For his part, the Cloud-author allows that the prayer, though it is best when it is silent, might sometimes break into speech: the passage just cited continues “bot if it be any seldom tyme, when for habundaunce of spiryt it brestiÞ up into worde” (except for occasionally, when because of an abundance of spirit it bursts up into words; 78). In his explanations of the procedure, in other words, he admits utterance as an exception. But insofar as it makes exclusive and invariable use of a word “of o silable,” the procedure has its own itinerary. Utterance is inherent to the syllable, and a prayer consisting in a syllable is thus an inherently vocal one. The contradiction between what the Cloud-author says the prayer procedure actually is and what he says about it cannot be neatly resolved. Accordingly, the task of the interpreter is first of all to register the contradiction itself, and then to reconstruct each of the two itineraries on its own terms. Because the second of these itineraries has been much followed, I address myself exclusively to that of the procedure itself.

As a syllable, then, the prayer happens aloud. It consists not just in any sort of utterance, however, but specifically in a “worde.” It will not take place in moaning, or whistling, or hollering. Instead, it will be a dictio or vox literata articulata, in Priscian’s terms: a writable word with a determinate sensus. As the examples “God” and “loue” (love) attest, it will not be a made-up word such as “bufbaf” nor an animal noise on the order of “coax cra.” Moreover, it will be confined to the utterance of a single word. It will not be a collection of words that together make up a phrase, a sentence, oratio, but just a word by itself. This specification accords with a principle of vocal brevity announced repeatedly in the treatise. If a single word is to be used, it appears to be because utterance should be kept to a minimum:

take Þee bot a litil worde of o silable; for so it is betir Þen of two, for euer Þe schorter it is, Þe betir it acordeÞ wiÞ Þe werk of Þe spirite. And soche a worde is Þis worde GOD or Þis worde LOUE. (28)

take just a little word of one syllable; for such a word is better than one of two syllables, for the shorter it is, the more fitting it is to the work of the spirit. And such a word is this word GOD or this word LOVE.

The shortness of the shortest possible word is most fitting to the work of unknowing because shortness in itself assists in prayer.

This principle of breviloquia, as it is found both within his treatise and elsewhere, does not account for the Cloud-author’s insistence on the use of a “litil worde of o silable.” As a rule, it is better to speak directly and succinctly than otherwise. But the prayer is distinct from utterance in general: it is not simply that its sounds should be kept to a minimum, but that this minimal utterance should take the form of a syllable. A word of one syllable could easily take longer to pronounce or contain more letters than a multisyllabic one, but the Cloud-author gives no indication that he is concerned with the length of the syllable that makes up the “litil worde.” All that matters is that it be
exactly as short as a syllable: “Cheese wheþer þou wilt [i.e., from the words God or loue], or anoþer as þee list: whiche þat þee likeþ best of o silable” (choose whichever of these two words you wish, or another as it pleases you: whichever word you like best that is of one syllable; 28). Although readers of the Cloud have regularly (and, to my mind, inexplicably) referred to the “litil worde” as “preferably” or “ideally” monosyllabic, in fact the Cloud-author admits no compromise on this point. He has only one stipulation: you can choose whatever word you like, as long as it be monosyllabic. To use a multisyllabic word is not to perform the work of unknowing in a less than ideal manner; it is not to perform it at all.

In this injunction to choose whatever word you wish lies what is perhaps the most notable characteristic of the “litil worde.” This is its complete lexical indifference. If all that matters is that it be of one syllable, the “litil worde” could certainly be “God” or “love,” but it could also be “cloud” or “is” or any other monosyllabic word. The Cloud-author could hardly be more explicit on this point, which has nonetheless been overlooked by modern scholars, who take the examples he gives to be the best and only words for the purpose. But if the words “God” and “love” are well suited to the task of praying, this in no way lessens the fact that they are only examples. This can easily be seen, however, in the fact that the second discussion of monosyllabic prayer relies on two examples not quite the same:

I maad no force, Þof Þou haddest now-on-dayes none oþer meditacions of Þin owne wre-chidnes, ne of Þe goodnes of God […] but soche as Þou mayst haue in Þis worde SYNNE and in Þis worde GOD, or in soche oþer, whiche as Þe list. (73)

I would not mind at all if, at this point, you had no other meditations on your own wretchedness or on the goodness of God than such as you may have in this word SIN or in this word GOD, or in another such word, whichever you like.

In the final clause, the Cloud-author makes the point explicitly: these are only examples. Moreover, the repetition of the phrase “as Þe list” (as you like) from his earlier remarks calls attention to the fact that he is resuming a discussion begun earlier. What comes most to the fore here is that the earlier examples have been partially replaced: “God” and “loue” have become “synne” and “God.” This discrepancy, and the substitutability of examples that it presupposes, is soon underscored still further. After describing a situation of emergency in which you shout “fiir!” (fire!) or “oute!” (help!), the Cloud-author returns his attention to the prayer that the emergency is supposed to be merely analogous to. But now, with the analogy ostensibly left behind, one of the words that appeared in it, “oute,” has become part of the prayer itself: “And crye Þan goostly euer upon one: ‘Synne, synne, synne; oute, oute, oute!’” (and then continually cry out, in your spirit, this one thing: “Sin, sin, sin; help, help, help!”; 78). First “God” and “loue,” then “synne” and “God,” and finally “synne” and “oute”: as the Cloud-author proceeds, his first examples come to be entirely displaced.

The shifting instances of the prayer word are not the only evidence that its choice is arbitrary. For the Cloud-author does not fail to address the question of which word is to be used. In the thirty-ninth chapter, after repeating that one should pray in a “litil worde of o silable,” he poses the question explicitly: “And what schal þis worde be? Sekyrlyche
soche a worde as is best acordyng unto Þe propirte of preier. And what worde is Þat?"
(And what shall this word be? Surely such a word as is most fitting to the nature of prayer. And what word is that?; 76). He explains that the words “God” and “synne” are very appropriate to the task, given that the meaning of these two words comprehends everything one would want to mean in a prayer. But the explanation does not suffice, as he knows, for he has made clear already that it is the number of syllables in a word that makes it appropriate rather than its meaning this or that. For this reason he goes on to specify that these words “God” and “synne” are not necessarily better than any others. If God had taught him to make use of some others, he would have done it:

ziif I had be lernyd of God to take any oþer wordes ouþer, I wolde Þan haue taken hem and lefte Þees; and so I rede Þat thou do. (77)
If I had been taught by God to take any other words instead, I would have taken them and left these; and I advise you to do the same.

These are the words he himself has been moved to use, so that they should not lightly be set aside; and yet what is important is not what word is chosen but the fact that you are moved to choose some word, whatever it be. What determines the choice of the word is nothing else than this stirring:

And Þerfore take Þou none oþer wordes to preie in — al-Þof I sette Þees here — bot soche as Þu arte sterid of God for to take. (77)
And therefore — even though I propose these ones — use no other words in your prayer than those you are stirred by God to use.

If you are stirred to use the words “God” and “synne,” there is no reason to choose some other word instead; but these words make themselves available to the stirring for a single reason. They are “fully brief” — that is, they are of one syllable:

ziif God stire Þee to take Þees, I rede not Þat Þou leue hem — I mene
ziif Þou schalt preie in wordes, & elles not; for whi Þei ben ful schorte wordes. (77)
If God stirs you to use these, I am not advising you to avoid them (that is, if you are praying with words, and not otherwise), since these words are fully brief.

The point is made without ambiguity: it does not matter what word you use. And yet the examples given are not entirely without interest, in that they allow a final notable characteristic of the “litil worde” to become clear. What is pertinent about the examples “God,” “loue,” “synne,” and “oute” is that they are words known to any speaker of the language in which the treatise is written. But this has nothing to do with Middle English as a particular language or with its so-called vernacularity. It simply means that the “litil worde” will not be a nomen barbarum: not an esoteric, foreign, or unfamiliar term but just any old word already known to you.14

I will return in closing to this question of the familiarity of the “litil worde.” But I cannot deny the importance of its being a word in a particular, vernacular language without a few words of explanation.15 For it is as an example of “vernacular theology” that the Cloud is most often now understood, and there is no denying that the treatise was composed right in the midst of what Nicholas Watson calls
an intense, approximately sixty-year cultural argument over the whole role of the vernacular in religious culture: an argument that took in larger questions about the intellectual capacities of the laity, the role of the clergy in ministering to them, and the suitability of vernacular theological writing as a vehicle for religious truth. (837)

That the treatise, and the “litil worde,” is in Middle English clearly makes a difference in the context of that cultural argument. But does this fact make any difference to the argument or arguments that the Cloud-author is himself interested in making, that is, to the treatise’s immanent concerns? In trying to answer this question I cannot help thinking that the most crucial evidence, which I have mentioned already, is that the Cloud-author — who concerns himself explicitly and at length both with matters of a broadly “linguistic” nature and with restricting the circulation of his treatise to particular communities of readers — never once draws attention to the fact that he writes in the vernacular. Nor, it seems to me, is there in the content of the treatise any instruction or speculation on which the fact of the multiplicity of languages or that of the relations among them has any bearing to speak of.

In the absence of any such connection, what is pertinent about the examples provided for the “litil worde” is that they are drawn from the same lexicon as are all the rest of the words that make up the treatise, not that that lexicon belongs to the particular language we call Middle English. It stands to reason that readers of the Cloud in untranslated form, whatever else might or might not be said about them, will be competent enough in the language of its composition to be familiar with those examples. Of course, the situation would be different with readers of the treatise in translation, and — though here too it bears keeping in mind that we are leaving the realm of the Cloud-author’s own text — it is instructive to consider the renderings of the examples of the “litil worde” in the two Latin versions of the Cloud prepared in the century after its composition. Both translators sometimes use Latin equivalents of the examples (deus, amor, peccatum — though neither ever translates the “interieccio” oute), sometimes leave them in the original, and sometimes include (with or without adverting to the fact) both the original and a translation: e.g., “clamemus aut verbo aut desiderio nichil aliud, nec plura verba, nisi hoc vnum: ‘God’ Anglice, Latine: ‘Deus’” (let us cry out, either aloud or only in desire, nothing else, nor in more words, than this one word: “God,” in English, “Deus” in Latin; Methley 56). They adopt these various strategies because their Latin texts would be incoherent without the presence of the English words. Indeed, in the translation prepared by Richard Methley in 1491, the passage in which the “litil worde” is first mentioned is given without Middle English gloss and is thus effectively unreadable until later passages can be compared with it: “Assume proinde tibi vnicum verbum vnius sillabe […] Et tale verbum, vt est: ‘Deus,’ sive illud: ‘Dileccio’” (thus, take for yourself a single word of one syllable. And such a word is “Deus” or “Dileccio”; 20).

The effort to avoid the absurdity of calling dileccio a word of one syllable suffices on its own to explain the translators’ inclusion of the vernacular words. It is neither necessary nor warranted to suppose that they wished thereby to signal that a vernacular lexicon is more suitable for the purposes of the prayer. In particular, there is no reason to believe — as has been suggested more than once — that English lends itself quasi-uniquely to
the work of unknowing because of its numerous monosyllabic words, whereas Latin’s polysyllables would leave it constitutionally unsuitable for the purpose. For although it is evidently true that *deus* and *amor* — not to mention *dileccio* — do not fit the bill, it would in fact be a simple matter to find a “litil worde of o silable” in the language of *hic haec boc*. All that is necessary is that the word answer to the description given by the *Cloud*-author.

2. The syllable-word

To summarize, this description is as follows: it is a vocal utterance, a word, a single word, whichever word you are incited to choose from among your already existing vocabulary, as long as it be monosyllabic. Put negatively, the “litil worde” is not silent, not a sigh or a wail, not a phrase or series of phrases, not any particular word, not one belonging to an unknown or invented language, and not a word of two or three or more syllables. That such a thing would lend itself to the purposes of prayer does not go without saying. The utterance of the “litil worde” is immediately and evidently distinct from more familiar practices: praising or petitioning, for example, either wordlessly, or extemporaneously, or as structured by rosary, psalter, or book of hours. But what I am at pains to show here is that this prayer takes a form that would allow for as precise a description as does the *Pater Noster*. The question is why anyone might wish to pray in such a manner. The *Cloud*-author explains that if he insists on the use of the “litil worde” it is because such an utterance lends itself most fittingly to the purpose to which it will be put. This fitness inheres in a characteristic of this word that he calls its “hoelnes”: the way that it can be kept whole.

Recall that the purpose of the *Cloud*’s technique is to do away with all the thoughts in your mind in order that the intellect may encounter the very absence of thought, the so-called cloud of unknowing. This encounter will be accomplished by means of the “litil worde,” which, according to an improbable figure, you use simultaneously to bludgeon your thoughts and to pound against the cloud. The double operation of unknowing consists in this blow — to which the *Cloud*-author gives the name “loue put” (love-thrust) — which takes place when you turn the word into an accouterment of battle, at once a sword you bash against the cloud of unknowing and a shield to keep your thoughts at bay. In being wielded in this manner, the word produces “þis lityl blynde loue put, when it is betyng upon þis derke cloude of unknowing, alle oþer þinges put doun and forþetent” (this little blind love-thrust, when it is beating upon this dark cloud of unknowing, all other things having been put down and forgotten; 58).

If the word of one syllable lends itself to this operation, it is because it can be kept whole. The *Cloud*-author explains that your importunate thoughts will constantly attempt to get you to explain the word, analyze it, that is, break it up into its parts, but this is what you must not do.

3if any Þou prees apon þee to ake þee what Þou woldest haue, answere him wiþ no mo wordes bot wiþ þis o worde. And 3if he profre þee of his grete clergie to expoune þee þat worde and to telle þee þe condicions of þat worde, sey him þat Þou wilt haue it al hole, and not broken ne undon. (28–9)
If any thought presses upon you to ask you what you are seeking, answer him with no more words than this one word. And if he offers to explicate that word for you, using his impressive learning, and to tell you about its various aspects, tell him that you want to have it entirely whole, and not broken or undone.

To keep the word whole is to withdraw it from the grammatical and logical procedures that would break it up by distinguishing in it genus from species, root from ending, literal sense from figurative sense — or syllable from syllable. This refusal of exposition by means of sheer repetition appears to seize upon the brevity and unity of the monosyllable, insofar as a longer word might be more readily articulated into parts. It would seem easier to keep “whole” a word made up of one syllable alone.

This appearance is deceptive. In fact syllable count and word count are entirely unrelated, and it is the peculiarity of the coincidence of part and whole in the monosyllabic word that matters here. If the Cloud-author recommends the use of a word of one syllable, it is not because the syllable, as Johnson has suggested, is “the shortest unit of audible language that carries meaning” (351). On the contrary, the syllable, as it is theorized in both the grammatical and logical traditions, is if anything the largest part of a word which is not in itself meaningful. In Priscian’s terms, the syllaba differs from the dictio first of all inasmuch as the one is a part of the other, but no less because it is in the nature of the word to bear a complete meaning. By contrast, the syllable in itself does not necessarily signify at all. Moreover, the grammarian demonstrates the meaningfulness of the word (its having sensus) exactly by opposing it to its parts. In other words, the syllable “-king” in the word “smoking” makes no reference to the monarchy; or, to use Priscian’s example, the meaning of a word like vires (men) is altogether distinct from that which might be imagined by someone breaking it up into vi (by force) and res (things.) The meaning of vires has nothing to do with that of the words vi and res, and more importantly the syllables vi- and -res have nothing to do with the words they resemble. Insofar as they remain syllables, they are subordinated to the word of which they are a part and do not themselves signify.

The meaninglessness of isolated syllables is a dictum of the logical as well as the grammatical authorities. Aristotle makes the point twice in the opening pages of De interpretatione. His explanation of why he has included, in his definition of the noun, the specification that “no part of [a noun] is significant separately” is that the syllable, its part, has no meaning in itself. In his influential commentary on Aristotle’s treatise, Boethius underscores this point: “although every noun is made up of them, syllables themselves do not yet mean anything at all.” So that when the commentator explains what Aristotle means in defining the noun as a kind of vox significativa (meaningful utterance), his contrasting example of a vox quae nihil designat (utterance that refers to nothing) is the syllable. The grammatical and logical authorities are in agreement on this point: the syllable has no semantic value, is as it were suspended in meaninglessness, until the word of which it is part has been uttered in its entirety.

And yet there is one sort of word whose whole signification would seem to arrive in the understanding at the same moment that a single syllable is pronounced, and that
is of course the monosyllabic word. This fact, that the non-significative part and the 
significative whole of a word can and in fact not infrequently do coincide, is not ignored 
by the grammatical authorities. To the contrary, it comes in for special treatment as the 
limit case that reveals the distinction between *dictio* and *syllaba* the more completely. 
Having already declared that the syllable does not always signify anything, Priscian 
explains that while it is true that a monosyllabic word can be called simply a syllable, 
this is the case only in an imperfect sense: for the syllable, he goes on, can in fact never 
signify anything by itself, since signifying is proper only to words.²³ It is nothing else 
than the existence of monosyllabic words that forces the grammarian to specify that the 
syllable is not just potentially but by nature totally and always non-signifying. In other 
words, the entity that would seem to undo the distinction between word and syllable is 
rather the basis on which their total irreconcilability makes itself known. Until a syllable 
has been placed within a word, it has none of the characteristics of a word and will not 
admit of any of the modes of apprehension proper to a word.²⁴ Conversely, once a word 
can be considered as a word, it ceases to be apprehensible on the basis of the syllable or 
syllables that make it up. In Priscian, it is thanks to the monosyllabic word that the fol-
lowing principle can be formulated: insofar as it is considered as a syllable, a word does 
not signify; and insofar as it is considered as significative, a word is no longer a syllable. 

The *Cloud*’s precept that the monosyllabic word be kept “whole” should be under-
stood in the light of this double exclusion. On the one hand, it is a matter of insisting on 
the lexical indifference of the monosyllabic utterance by confounding the efforts of your 
thoughts to tell you what the word means. On the other, the utterance is not a syllable 
but a “worde” of one syllable, and the task is to keep it precisely “whole,” that is, a word 
and not a syllable. The work will consist, then, in producing an utterance that in being 
both syllable and word is emphatically neither. This “litil worde of o silable” is not, after 
all, a “monosyllabic word” but something that might be better called a “syllable-word.” 
Wholly and only a word, it is nonetheless retained at the level of the syllable: and this 
means that to utter it is to produce a word that is totally non-signifying.

3. Its production

This meaningless word is not given but produced. Both the end and the means of its own 
production, the syllable-word emerges only in repetition. This crucial point is one that 
the *Cloud*-author makes almost glancingly, though he declares in so doing that, while he 
barely addresses it, it is no less important than the one characteristic of the “litil worde” 
he has underscored so heavily. The word is to be repeated incessantly:

> al-Þof the shortnes of preier be greetly comendid here, neuerÞeles Þe oftnes of preier is 
> neuer Þe raÞer refreynid […] it schuld neuer sees tyl tyme were Þat it had fully getyn Þat Þat 
> it longid after. (78)

Although the shortness of prayer is much recommended here, this does not mean that the 
frequency of prayer is to be restrained […] it should never cease until it has fully gotten what 
it longed after.
And thus when the Cloud-author gives an example not just of the word used in the prayer but of the “cric” in which it sounds, he sets the word down repeatedly: “And crye Þan euer upon one: ‘Synne, synne, synne; oute, oute, oute!’” (and then continually cry out this one thing: “Sin, sin, sin; help, help, help!”; 78). Now this frequency of the utterance corresponds to its use as a “loue-put” — a beating against the cloud of unknowing. The word is fixed to the heart so as to be always working: “fasten Þis worde to Þin herte, so Þat it neuer go Þens for Þing Þat bifalleÞ” (fasten this word to your heart, so that it is never separated from it, no matter what happens; 28). But there is more to be said about it. The repetition of the single word prevents its entry into “ordered speech,” it isolates it as a word outside of a grouping of words. To repeat the same word over and over again is to never produce a sentence into which it could be fit but to produce instead what Johnson has called a “recursive and asyntactic” prayer (346), or in Vincent Gillespie’s phrase an utterance “syntactically uninhibited” (“Postcards” 153). But this insistence on the single word is very far from an insistence on its signification, from a hammering home of whatever it might mean. This is explicit in the Priscianic definition of the word as distinct from the syllable: for if a word has a sensus, the grammarian hastens to add that this status is exclusively granted by its placement within a sentence. The sensus of the whole and single word can only be gathered by reference to its participation in a sentence, an oratio, the ordered combination of words that taken together show a complete sententia. That is, although the word has meaning in itself, this meaning is not granted by the word’s being definable in itself but only insofar as it can be picked out from the succession of words. For instance, you cannot know if the word “smells” is a noun or a verb, if it is a verb whether transitive or intransitive, and (in speech if not in writing) if it is a noun whether nominative or genitive, without a sentence in which the word would appear: and its sensus would be different in each case. The repetition of a single word outside of a phrase or sentence as taught in the Cloud is a refusal of the kind of ordered speech that would complete itself and thereby allow its various parts to show the sense of their combination and therefore the sense of each part.

Repetition thus deprives the “litil worde” of its sensus from two directions: both by retaining it at the level of the syllable and by preventing it from forming part of a sentence. But maybe it is not necessary to refer to the authority of a Priscian here. As the Cloud-author says, this word is “betyr lernid of God by Þe proef Þen of any man by worde” (better learned from God by experience than from any man by speech; 68). And you already know very well what happens when you say “cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud.” It is the same with the word “love,” or any other: repeating it ad infinitum does not reinforce its meaning but cancels it out. In a process familiar to everyone, sometimes called “semantic satiation,” the more you repeat an utterance the less it seems to have to do with any concept or thing. A duration can be produced by the repetition of an utterance in which whatever signification might have attached to it before, and in all likelihood will do so again, just cannot possibly have anything to do with it for the time being. During this duration, not only does the semantic value of a word become uncoupled from its sound-shape or figura vocis, but the sound-shape itself appears to change, though mysteriously, so that it would belong to a distinct and
unknown other word. The method of prayer of the *Cloud of Unknowing* is nothing else than the child’s game of repeating a word until it sounds like absolutely nothing you have ever heard before and cannot possibly be considered to mean anything, even while it is indistinguishable from a word with which you remain altogether familiar.

The procedure is thus a means of turning “God” or “loue” or “synne” or “oute” into a nonsense word. It is a collection of ruses to be employed in the confounding of the concepts that will attempt to join themselves to an utterance. These are as follows, each reduplicating the effect of the others. The word should be maintained in a state in which it cannot be told apart from a mere syllable. It should be pronounced without regard for its lexical specificity. It should be repeated incessantly, so that it takes on the bizarre proportions of a sound estranged from its usual familiarity and sense. It should be kept in a state of non-exposition, and wielded against all impulses to explain it or use it to explain anything else. Each of these stipulations conduces to the same end: the production of an utterance that enjoys an existence independent of reference and signification.

Such utterances were not unknown to the grammatical and logical authorities, from the “coax cra” of Priscian to the “buba” and “bufbaf” of the late medieval theorists of terms. But the *Cloud*-author does something unattempted in grammar or logic, not to mention in theology or devotional literature: he provides a method for the production of the nonsense word. His strange proposal is that you turn an ordinary word into a meaningless one, *vox significativa* into *vox non-significativa*. This operation is neither grammatical nor logical. According to Boethius, a grammarian will accept a nonsense word blithely, whereas a logician will reject it — this being, effectively, the difference between their two disciplines. But the work of unknowing consists neither in accepting such a word nor in rejecting it but rather in producing it. The prayer procedure takes place in a possibility inherent in *vox* that opens between grammar and logic, in which you make your own voice available as an instrument for the carrying out of a task. The innovation of the *Cloud*-author should be located here, in his pressing into service a sort of utterance widely recognized though widely ignored in the medieval sciences of language. He does this because he believes the syllable-word to be possessed of a particular efficacy: it causes something to happen; it *works*.

4. Its use

What does the repetition of the word to the point of meaninglessness bring about? Here too the syllabic nature of the “litil worde” is of central importance. For the efficacy of the utterance is a monosyllabic efficacy, as the *Cloud*-author explains by means of a comparison between the person carrying out the prayer and someone caught in a fire and crying for help. How, the *Cloud*-author asks, will such a person shout? “3e, how? Sekirly not in many woordes, ne 3it in o woorde of two silabes” (yes, how? Surely not in many words, nor in a single word of two syllables; 74). When praying, you should shout like a person in an emergency, who will not stop to think about what he wants to shout but will rather naturally emit a monosyllabic cry like “fire!” This is because brevity befits the direness of your situation, that is, the wretchedness of sin. But the syllable-word is
not only appropriate to the state of its speaker but useful, and useful because it strikes
the ears of whoever hears it in a particular way:

And rìst as Þis lityl worde FIRE sterið raðer and peerseð more hastely Þe eren of Þe herers,
so doð a lityl worde of o syllable [...] And raðer it peerseð Þe eres of Almyghty God Þan doð
any longe sauter vmonyndfully mumlyd in Þe teeð (74)

And just as this little word FIRE stirs more and pierces more quickly the ears of the hearers,
so does a little word of one syllable. And it pierces the ears of Almighty God more than does
any long psalter distractedly mumbled in the teeth.

Such a word more effectively brings succor than other forms of speech: whoever is within
hearing distance will more readily come to your aid if you shout “help!” than if you
remark that you might benefit from their assistance should they be willing to consider
offering it. And this is so even, the Cloud-author goes on, in the case of mortal enemies.
He claims that you will jump out of bed — “3e! Þof it be aboute midwintirs niȝt” (indeed,
even on a midwinter night) — to help your “deedly enmye” (deadly enemy) without
giving any particular thought to the chill or to the fact that he is your enemy, if only he
cry out “fïre!” (76).

Despite its homely appearance, the figure of someone in a fire shouting for help was a
commonplace in thirteenth-century grammatical discussions of what we now call “per-
formative speech acts,” where it was used to illustrate the doctrine that sentences need
not be grammatically complete in order to be understandable and effective (Rosièr-Catìach
212). The Cloud-author employs this figure in the context of prayer: if the syllable-word
forces even enemies to help one another, he suggests, how much more useful will it be
when it is addressed to God. The syllable-word all but forces the one hearing it to respond
against his or her will, it puts out of commission whatever unwillingness to help might
be present, and makes your enemy merciful toward you, or you merciful toward your
enemy, “not aȝenstonding his enmite” (despite his enmity; 76). The Cloud-author does
not go so far as to say that you will compel God to do anything unwillingly, but he comes
remarkably close. This is how he explains it: if — through grace — the worst sinner,
who is to God as it were an enemy, is able to “crye soche a lityl silable” (cry such a little
syllable), notwithstanding their enmity “he scholde for Þe hidous noise of Þis crye be
alweis herde and holpen of God” (he will, on account of the hideous noise of this cry,
be always heard and helped by God; 75–6).

What matters in the syllable-word is thus its “hidous noise.” The efficacy of the little
word is lodged in the “noise” of its “crye,” and it is for the sake of this noise that it is
pressed into service in the prayer procedure. If God does not hear the particular word
uttered, he does hear and respond to its noise, which is terrifying or horrifying. This
is because, as the Cloud-author explains, you make something plain to God altogether
differently than you do to another person. It would be exactly wrong to think that you
should try to tell God anything, about yourself or himself or something else again, about
a wish or a fear or a state of affairs. But this does not mean that if God hears and helps
you when you emit a syllable-word it is because the clamor of its noise communicates
to him the mere fact that you need help. Operating under this misconception might lead
you to make
a bodily schewyng vnto hym, ouþer in contenaunce, or in voice, or in worde, or in som oþer rude bodily streynyng, as it is when ou schalt schewe a þing þat is hid in þin hert to a bodily man; & in as moche bi werk schuld haue ben impure. For on o maner schal a þing be schewid to man, & on an-oþer maner vnto God. (90)

a physical display to him, either with your expression, or your voice, or your words, or in some other rude physical exertion, as you do when you want to display something hidden in your heart to a physical person; and insofar as you do this your work will be impure. For in one manner shall a thing be showed to man, and in another manner to God.

In speaking to God it is not a question of making known what is within you, as it is when you speak to another person. But what the Cloud-author’s emphasis not just on the word but also on the voice, face, and gesture indicates is that the utterance will “not make known” not only insofar as its sensus is to be placed under suspension but because its force as a natural sign is too.

The hideous noise of the syllable-word is not, in other words, the sound of a yell or scream, it is not the recuperation in the voice of an originary cry. The “litil worde” does not cease to be a word, a dictio or locutio, an utterance fundamentally writable. But this is not because an inarticulate utterance would necessarily be outside the circuit of meaningful utterances. On the contrary, the problem with inarticulate utterances is that they say too much: that they too make something known. For there are two ways in which the voice is understood to signify in the Aristotelian tradition: as encoding, arbitrarily, some idea to which a particular utterance would be assigned (or, as the medieval logicians said, “imposed on”), and also as symptomatizing by its very presence the fact that some mental state is occurring, the same way that smoke indicates fire. In other words, when someone speaks you can gather from the noise produced not only some particular signified content but also the bare fact that a person is there, meaning something-or-other, whatever it turn out to be. Vocal sound may or may not communicate an arbitrarily imposed meaning but in any case it will always announce the presence of a will to signify. This is why sighs, yells of pain, and the like, are not without signification, even though they are unwritable and have not been imposed on any particular concept. And this is why if a person speaks a language you do not know, you are still able to gather that the person has something in his mind that he is attempting to make known by means of his voice. It is to this dimension of signification that the Cloud-author alludes in his celebrated prose castigating people who want to display their holiness in their bizarre modes of comporting themselves, and especially with their voices, expressions, and gestures. These wretches, gripped by their ill-advised wish to know things and to display what knowledge they have already, screw up their eyes like sheep knocked over the head, or tilt their heads to one side as though they had a worm in their ear; others “pipyn when þei schuld speke, as Der were no spirit in þeire bodies” (chirp when they should speak, as if there were no spirit in their bodies) or “crien and whinen in þeire þrote, so ben þe greedi & hasty to sey þat þei Þink” (cry and whine in their throats, so greedy and hasty are they to say what they think; 97–98). In trying to show something with their voices and countenances, such squeakers and lispers fracture the voice into parts, rather than keeping it whole in the effort to display nothing with it.
In short, the “hideous noise” that makes God hear the syllable-word is not a clamor that makes it known that something is happening. What is frightful about the “litil worde” is that it does not even do that: it makes nothing at all known. Its hideousness is that of a word repeated to the uncanny point of perfect nonsense. It is for the sake of this particular hideousness that the Cloud-author insists that you should go so far as to conceal the meaning of your prayer from God, that you should hide your desire in as dark an obscurity as possible. Thus you should perform the prayer as if “Þou on no wyse woldest lat hym wite hou fayne Þou woldest see hym and haue hym or fele hym” (you would in no way let him know how much you would like to see him and have him or feel him; 87). And this because it is in concealment that your desire will make itself known to him most easily and fully. “It schuld more cleerly com to his knowing, to Þi profite & in fulfyllyng of Þi desire, by soche an hiding, Þan it scholde by any oþer maner of schewyng” (it will come to his knowledge more clearly, to your benefit and in fulfillment of your desire, by such a concealment, than it would by any other manner of showing; 88). If the point of the prayer procedure is to put the meaning of the “litil worde” under suspension, it is because the word will more effectively come to the hearing of God if its meaning is hidden as deep as possible: as it were concealed both from him and from yourself.

But what does it mean to be holpen of God? What is the success of a prayer that asks for nothing? It is a state of the intellect made possible by the hideous noise. The purpose of the word that makes nothing known is exactly to produce a failure of knowledge in which nothing is known. This is because such a failure of knowledge is itself the knowing of God. As the Cloud-author puts it, while a person can never “bi Þe werk of his vnderstondyng com to Þe knowyng of an vnmaad goostly Þing, Þe whiche is nou þot God” (come, by the work of his understanding, to the knowledge of an uncreated spiritual thing, which is nothing but God; 125), this does not mean that knowledge of God is impossible. For he continues: “Bot by Þe failyng it may; for whi Þat Þing Þat it failiÞ in is noþing else bot only God” (but by means of the failure itself such knowledge may occur, since the thing that it fails in is nothing else than God himself; 125). While the work of the understanding will never allow a person to know God, in this very failure such knowledge may occur. It is the purpose of the prayer procedure to bring about this failure, by producing a thinking that does not extend itself toward any particular object. In the Cloud-author’s most favored phrase, it is a thought “wiþ-outen special beholdyng,” that is, free of particular regard. It intends nothing and is without object. The technique of the Cloud works as follows: the repetition of the syllable-word produces a null-word, in whose hideous noise the intellect becomes suspended as a null-thought which is the knowledge of God.

5. Cogitatio secundum vocem solam

One characteristic of the “litil worde” remains unaccounted for: its familiarity. If the prayer procedure consists in stripping a word like “loue” of its sensus by means of repetition, why not simply start with a word to which no sensus is attached? Why not use a made-up or foreign word? The answer is that something different happens when you
hear a familiar word made meaningless by repetition than when you hear an unknown word. When a familiar word is stripped in this way of its meaning, it does not become a simply unknown word. Rather, it remains a known word even as your knowledge of it is withdrawn. What emerges is a ludicrousness, the overwhelming improbability that this utterance could be the same one you are familiar with, even as you have every reason to believe that it is. This ludicrousness occurs in the state of knowing that you know but not knowing. The “unknowing” of the *Cloud* is just this experience of language that occurs in the withdrawal of sense in repetition. In other words, the already known word is possessed of a force which an unknown word is not: its familiarity gives rise to an incomprehension that is not merely a fact but a problem. Instead of sliding past the ears, the word sticks. Undeniably familiar, and yet wrenched from its recognizability, the repeated word cannot be a matter of indifference. It presses itself upon you, compelling the mind to take notice of its own inability to conceive.

The experience of the cloud of unknowing is this remittance of the intellect to what Gaunilo of Marmoutiers had called, three hundred years earlier, *cogitatio secundum vocem solam* (Anselm, Vol 1, 127). The *Cloud*-author invents his own technique of “thought according to the utterance alone” on the basis of the familiar experience of what takes place when a word is repeated over and over again, and on the basis of the properties of the utterance as they were theorized in the grammatical and logical traditions. And indeed this same affliction of the mind had long before been described by Boethius as that of any person hearing an utterance, such as a nonsense word or a syllable uttered by itself, which means nothing at all. According to Boethius, whoever hears a *vox quae nihil designat* will undergo an unpleasant experience: his mind will wander around, twisted and turned upon itself, unable to come to rest.27 It is because nonsensical utterances can produce such a mental effect, removed from all possibility of the apprehension of truth or falsity, that Boethius banishes them from the discipline of logic, relegating them to that of grammar. But it is for the very same reason that the *Cloud*-author develops a method for producing them. For the vertiginous state of mind that Boethius identifies is exactly what the *Cloud’s* technique is meant to bring about:

For I tell you truly that I would rather be nowhere physically, wrestling with that blind nothing, than to be so great a lord that, whenever I wanted, I could physically be anywhere at all […]. Leave aside this nowhere and this anything, in favor of this nowhere and this nothing. (122)

The prayer-work of the *Cloud* follows a procedure whose single aim is to produce a nonsense word, in order that the mind of the person uttering it might be forced to roam, without an object, in no place at all. This mental failure occurs only when you become caught up in the hideous noise of a word repeated to the point of senselessness. For the *Cloud*-author, the unknowing of God is an encounter with the limits of language in the form of a nonsense word produced by your own voice. But far from an escape from language, this encounter with the syllable-word is rather what Giorgio Agamben has
called, in another context, “an experience which is undergone only within language, an experimentum linguae in the true meaning of the words, in which what is experienced is language itself” (4).

Notes

1 Namely, passages from Chapter 7 and Chapters 36 through 40. Eleanor Johnson’s important recent article on the Cloud contains the fullest and best discussion of these passages.

2 On the place of the treatise within the tradition of affective theology, see Lees; Minnis “Sources,” “Affection”; Turner; Coolman.

3 See also Burrow; Chap. 45–7; Hilton 83; Rolle 108.

4 Too much has been made of the “paradoxical” fact that the Cloud-author appears to indulge continually in stylistic flourishes even as he “distrusts language,” that he sets himself against the “fleshy tongue” even as he employs “homely metaphors.” According to a principle to be found both in the Celestial Hierarchy and the Mystical Theology of the Pseudo-Dionysius, it is more fitting to predicate the most apparently unlike thing of God than the most like, given that between God and creatures there is a radical separation in which degrees of likeness hold only in a very tenuous sense. One will be led less astray by the proposition “God is a stick or a stone” than by “God is a spirit,” because one will bridle against the former while more or less accepting the latter, when neither is in any case true. Accordingly, the Cloud’s “homely” style is no more — and no less — adequate than would be a more refined, spiritual, elevated tone; but its improbability allows its failure to show itself more plainly. It does not betoken a pastoral care for the common folk, who would identify more readily with speech about down-home things. It does not represent a vote in commonsense as over against a decadent, Latinate, refined, spiritual, elevated tone; but its improbability more — and no less — adequate than would be a more or less accepting the latter, when neither is in any case true. The account of a “grammatical metaphor” as is found in Alain of Lille’s De planctu naturae, to cite only the best known example — nor of the theological grammaticizing of that same author’s Regularae theologicae. Nonetheless the possibility of the spiritual grammar as a genre and the prevalence of the grammatical metaphor in medieval texts speak to the point I am making here: that the Cloud-author could simply not have been unaware of the teachings contained in the basic grammar textbooks. Of particular interest in the present connection are the pages John Alford devotes to English artes praedicandi in his survey of medieval instances of the grammatical metaphor.

5 Katherine Zieman has also noted the indispensability of the “litil worde.” As she writes, the Cloud-author relies “if not on the voice, then on the idea of vocality and linguistic expression […] The single-syllable is at least an expository, if not an imaginative, necessity” (“Perils” 158).

6 For overviews of the discipline see Irvine and Copeland and Sluiter. The other medieval science in which the term syllaba has currency is that of music. There too it would indicate an inescapably vocal nature of the prayer. On the relation between grammatical and musical accounts of the utterance, see Leach.

7 The supposed silence of the prayer would bring it in line with monastic and, notably, Carthusian devotional practices. But it should be noted that even or especially the monastic acceptance of “silence” does not necessarily involve the absence of vocalization. Many forms of activity falling under the rubric of vacatio, silentium, and so forth, consist largely in speaking. One has only to imagine the famous apian murmur of the horae silentii, on which see Bruce. On Carthusian practices of silence in England, which are
of particular importance in the case of the *Cloud*, whose manuscripts are of Carthusian provenance and whose author is assumed, though not without some doubt, to have been a Carthusian himself, see Brantley.  

See, e.g., the exhortation at Matthew 6.7–8 *orantes autem multum loqui*, as well as the many regulations of speech found in monastic and pastoral literature, chief among which the formula *multum loqui non amare* in the Benedictine Rule. Alastair Bennett’s recent work on the principle that *brevis oratio penetrat celum* includes a discussion of the *Cloud*.  

On Priscian’s account, a single syllable can be as long as six letters and as short as one (44). For his part, Donatus defines and discusses the syllable solely in terms of its being short, long, or “common.” Indeed, its variable length is of course what matters most about the syllable for the purposes of Latin prosody.  

The strangeness of unknown or foreign words was, in magical contexts, sometimes thought to make them more efficacious. See, e.g., Rohrbacher-Sticker. This is precisely not the case with the *Cloud*, as we will shortly.  

The category of “vernacular theology” has been enormously productive in the last three decades. Nevertheless it seems to me to have a more limited explanatory capacity than is sometimes made out. In this I follow the indications given recently by D. Vance Smith, Katherine Zieman (“Perils”), and Vincent Gillespie (“Vernacular Theology”).  

As Smith has argued, “vernacular theology may constitute daring and original thinking, but to assume that its own aim is to unfold outside institutionalization — among others, “Latinate” — intellectual formations is to mistake our interests with its own.” For him, what is occluded in this focus on our own interests is finally “that its own aim is to unfold outside institutionalized — among others, “Latinate” — intellectual formations and on whatever continent, no less than of readers in fourteenth- or fifteenth-century England.”  

Smith affirms in the case of Methley, he “saw nothing inherently ‘vernacular’ about the Cloud’s theology that would not succeed in Latin” (455).  

“Dictio est pars minima orationis constructae, id est in ordine compositae: pars autem, quantum ad totum intellegendum, id est ad totius sensus intellectum; hoc est intellegendum, aliquid habet. Syllaba autem non omni modo aliquid significat per se” (53).  

“The non-significative quality of the syllable is also evidenced in what Katherine Zieman, discussing late medieval examinations of clerical literacy, calls a “formulaic expression regularly used to denote ‘minimal ability’ in these tests: legere aut sibilicare — ‘read or syllabify’” (Singing 60). The ability to “syllabify” a text is simply to be able to read it aloud correctly, without knowing what it means.  

“Vides ergo per se ipsam syllabam deficere praedictorum ratione nec aliter posse examinissim tractari, nisi posita sit in diction” (53).  

“In Peircean terms, the distinction is between symbol and index. The classic treatment of this distinction in Aristotle is Kretzmann’s.”  

“Si quis vero huiusmodi vocem ceperit, quae nihil omnino designet, animus eius nulla significacione neque intellegentia roboratus errat ac vertitur nec ullis designationis finibus conquiescit” (74).  

**Works cited**


**Notes on contributor**

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